

FROM: PETER CLAPPER SUBSTITUTING FOR
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The other day a group of United States senators practically killed John McCone with kindness. In the process, a weakness was revealed in the Central Intelligence Agency just as serious as the CIA's recurrent problems in weighing its findings. We'll never know if the praise heaped upon the head of the CIA was put there to cushion the revelation. Sometimes, senators have been known to drop just as many compliments insincerely as sincerely. That's politics. It's camouflage to protect the politicians when they take what might become an unpopular stand. To criticize John McCone might not be very popular. He has a distinguished record in both private and public life. But peeking thru the camouflage, a suspicious reporter gets an impression that the senators might be trying to tell the CIA Chief to shape up or ship out.

The senators in this case were members of the Preparedness Investigating subcommittee. The occasion was the publication of a so-called "sanitized" interim report on their probe of the military build-up in Cuba.

This report is important. It's apparently the result of the first extensive hearing to focus directly on the CIA. In other words, it's the first time that the public has ever been given a glimpse into the machinery of the so-called intelligence community. The importance of the report is further underlined by the fact that the Preparedness Investigating subcommittee made it. Few senatorial groups can match the subcommittee's reputation for digging up the unvarnished truth.

The subcommittee's interim report finds that the CIA apparently allowed preconceptions to color its evaluations of the Soviet build-up in Cuba, that the CIA routinely underestimated the build-up, and, most disquieting of all, may still be doing so.

That's what the report told us. But the senators, in their flowery way, told us a tad more. Democratic Senator Henry Jackson of Washington state started it all the day that the report was released. He arose on the floor of the Senate to announce that CIA Director John McCone suspected a build-up of offensive missiles in Cuba at least two months before those missiles brought the world closer than it had ever been to nuclear war. To corroborate his announcement, Senator Jackson presented testimony from the secret probe by the Preparedness Investigating subcommittee, of which he's a member.

In the testimony, Mr. McCone acknowledged that he knew of an unusual movement of men and equipment from Russia to Cuba as early as last July. He testified that he knew of surface-to-air missile sites in Cuba, which would not be particularly useful in repelling an invasion, but which would be useful in preventing aerial reconnaissance. The only thing worth hiding from aerial reconnaissance, Mr. McCone concluded, would be offensive missiles.

His reasoning could have provided two months in which this government could have sought detours around the eventual immensely hazardous nuclear confrontation. Senator Jackson praised the CIA chief for his well-developed intuition. It was a bandwagon onto which other senators quickly jumped.

But in jumping, Democratic Senator Symington of Missouri let the cat out of the bag. Unfortunately, he said, Mr. McCone's intuition was not reflected in the actions of the Air Force and the other departments which have to do with our intelligence. Again unfortunately, said Senator Symington, although Mr. McCone wisely told CIA about his apprehensions, that information was not passed on.

Another bankwagon rider was Republican Senator Goldwater of Arizona. In praising Mr. McCone, Senator Goldwater said somewhere along the line there was a breakdown.

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Indeed there was. What good is it to have that vast mysterious CIA, hunched in the Virginia woods across the Potomac from Washington, if it doesn't pass the word? What good is it to leave uncanny intuitions at the top untapped? From the earlier Bay of Pigs episode, the quivering antennae of national concern picked up clues that the intelligence community was not communicating. The dismal failure of communication revealed by the Senators is evidence that the trouble-shooting investigation of the CIA by Attorney General Robert Kennedy's little task force failed to shoot the trouble.

As we all know to our nation's sorrow, the only things we hear about our intelligence agencies are the bad things. The foul-ups can't be hidden; the successes can't be reported. Unfortunately, the only way we'll know if the communications blackout between the CIA and the rest of the intelligence community continues, is when the next mistake is made. Senator Symington said he has been assured that CIA will never again sit on its information -- and intuitions.

If the assurances prove baseless, Congress will be justified in sitting on the CIA -- hard.

This is Pete Clapper saying good night from Washington.